

The New York Times
November 24, 2004

Nafta, Redux

Dogfights in Capitol Hill over free-trade pacts usually pop up not long after presidential elections. Back in 1993, Bill Clinton doled out promises to everybody and their mother to get the North American Free Trade Agreement passed, while President Bush in 2001 had his Congressional allies actually hold a vote open for an extra 23 minutes so they could force a weeping North Carolina congressman to abandon his textile constituency and give the president the single-vote margin he needed for trade negotiating authority.

Next spring promises to be no exception. Mr. Bush has indicated he will try to push through a Central American Free Trade Agreement through Congress, or Cafta. Like Nafta, Cafta would open up trade -- valued at \$32 billion -- between the United States and El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

The usual suspects are already lining up -- business leaders for, labor unions against -- and many Democrats are protesting that the pact does not go far enough to protect labor and environment in Central America. It would be easier to believe Congressional opponents really did care about protecting labor and environmental standards in other countries if many of them had not also voted in favor of an American-Jordan free trade accord, which included nearly identical language on labor and environment. Cafta actually goes further than the pact with Jordan, since penalty fines collected for not enforcing labor laws would be sent back to the offending country to fix the offense. If, for instance, the United States won a case charging that El Salvador didn't have enough inspectors in its factories, the fine that the El Salvadoran government paid would go toward hiring more inspectors, instead of just ending up in the United States Treasury.

It is easy to see why leading House Democrats like Representative Charles Rangel of New York, the ranking minority member on the House Ways and Means Committee and a normally sound voice on trade, are distancing themselves from Cafta. Mr. Rangel has been pushed around for so long by highhanded Republican behavior that he is not feeling particularly bipartisan these days. The few Democrats who do sometimes support free-trade pacts are waiting to see what they might be offered as the legislative equivalent of the ever-popular swing voters.

We hope President Bush and the Republican leadership can come up with compromises in other areas that might woo Mr. Rangel and the Democrats. The Central American accord is a good idea that will help job growth in a needy region. And if Mr. Rangel and his associates can convince the other side to pare back some of their other plans -- those tax cuts for the wealthy come to mind -- so much the better.